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## **What can security do for food? Lessons from Brazil**

Dr João Nunes and Dr Ben Richardson  
Department of Politics and International Studies  
University of Warwick, UK

### **Abstract**

What are the analytical benefits of using the security vocabulary when addressing issues of human well-being? And to what extent can a security framing of these issues be useful in the normative and political sense – that is, when making judgments about existing policies and when formulating and implementing alternative ones? This article uses the case of food security to engage with these questions. It argues for a shift away from conceptual fine-tuning of what food security should mean and towards an appreciation of how security functions as a political modality. Whilst acknowledging that this modality can work to encourage international conflict, enable governmental control and empower global capitalism, we refute the idea that security has an inherent logic which denies progressive politics. Drawing on the idea of emancipation in critical security studies, and applying it to empirical examples from contemporary Brazil, we show how food security can help expedite action to address harm and vulnerability, reinforce the public sphere and widen the scope of social concern.

### **Keywords**

Human security; food security; food sovereignty; emancipation; Brazil

### **Introduction**

The concept of food security has become increasingly prevalent in global politics. Alongside agencies like the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and the World Health Organization which have long placed food and nutrition security at the core of their activities, the United Nations (UN) has seen a re-birth of its Committee on World Food Security and in 2008 established a High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis. Along the same lines, various governmental bodies readily use the language of security in relation to food. The EU portrays itself as ‘a mainstay of support for food security’ around the world (EuropeAid 2013); the US Government declares its intent to help ‘feed our growing population’ through its Office of Global Food Security (US Department of State 2014); and the Indian Parliament passes ambitious anti-hunger legislation in the shape of the 2013 National Food Security Act. The quest for food security has even made it onto the agenda of the World Economic Forum, an organisation one usually associates with issues surrounding finance rather than famine. But despite its growing incidence, food security is a far from uncontentious term. Like the other non-military threats identified by the United Nations Development Programme in their landmark 1994 *Human Development Report*, questions have been asked about why food should be treated as a matter of security at all – rather than, for example, one of poverty, justice, resilience or democracy. According to some of the most powerful critiques of the ‘human security’ approach, the security frame turns everything into a matter of security and so becomes meaningless; does not add anything new to our understanding of the issues nor shed light on political alternatives; and may even open the door for heavy-handed policies (see Paris 2001, Christie 2010, Newman 2010). Indeed, many food policy reformers and activists now steer clear of security altogether, preferring to use the registers of rights and sovereignty instead (see Kent 2005, Patel 2009).

These concerns point to the political implications of framing food in different ways. Contrary to what is implied in the *Human Development Report*, to speak of an issue as a security matter is not simply to state a self-evident threat. Rather, such framing helps to shape the very reality one purports to describe. This is because language does not simply describe things but also *does* things. Moreover, it allows for certain things *to be done*. In other words, constituting food problems in a certain way shapes the political options deemed desirable and feasible to address them. This happens regardless of whether the issue is understood in the national security sense (for example, as a question of domestic or regional stability in the face of unrest and rioting), as an individual/human

security issue (that is, as a question of well-being and a life free from want), or even as a societal security issue (the survival of the traditions and way of life of groups and communities). As such, one of our arguments in what follows is that in failing to fully take on board the implications of 'speaking' and 'thinking' security, much of the literature calling for better food security policy remains politically naïve.

However, we also have a second argument to make, which relates to the political potentialities of security. Whilst sympathetic to the concerns of those who have abandoned the food security concept, we argue that they have also overlooked its progressive possibilities. Consequently, not only has this left the usage of security uncontested, allowing powerful actors to deploy the concept with greater latitude and for self-interested purposes, it also robs the political lexicon of a unique way of making emancipatory demands. Put simply, security can do important things for food that rights and sovereignty cannot. In order to unlock this potential we draw on the critical security studies literature, which has to date remained largely divorced from the food studies literature. We suggest that the discursive structures of security can be navigated in such a way as to override the logic of exclusion, coercion and exceptional measures with which security is usually associated. We also present an empirical study of the Brazilian experience to show what a politicised application of food security looks like in practice. Our reflection about food also holds important lessons for broader human security debates, which we tease out in the conclusion.

### **Tracing the food-security nexus**

Where does the food-security nexus come from, and what does it mean to talk about food as a security matter? The common approach to answering this question is to trace the changing use of 'food security' within the major institutions of the international system – particularly the UN and the FAO – and to a lesser extent in national ministries and departments in Anglophone countries (see Jarosz 2011). Within this genealogy, a helpful starting point is provided by the 1974 UN World Food Conference. This meeting was spearheaded by US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, ostensibly in response to famine in Bangladesh and rising food prices on world markets. Out of this conference, food security was explicitly codified as:

The availability at all times of adequate world supplies of basic food-stuffs...to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption...and to offset fluctuations in production and prices (UN 1975).

This definition crystallised geopolitical concerns with instability that were predominant at the time, and led to a focus on national self-sufficiency through closer international co-ordination of food reserves, development funds, and agricultural policy via a World Food Council (which was later abandoned). In many ways this reinforced the established national management programmes of the post-war era in which 'security rested almost entirely on the stockholding policies of the major food exporting countries' (Shaw 2007, p.34). Interestingly, the non-governmental organizations participating in the conference also sought to insert food within a national security framing, specifying in their attendant declaration that 'food security and the maintenance of adequate, readily available reserves must have at least as high priority as military security' (ibid., p.142). This approach was reiterated again within the context of Third World developmentalism in the 1980 report of the Brandt Commission, which specified that 'greater food production, intensified agricultural development, and measures for international food security are essential' for ending world hunger (Independent Commission on International Development Issues 1980, p. 197).

Despite some opposition to the re-badging of rural development problems as ones of food security, the notion that food was a security problem was largely accepted. However, the specific definition of food security was not so readily agreed upon, and three general challenges were made to it throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Maxwell 1996). First, work by Amartya Sen and others critiqued the idea that famine was due to a lack of food. Instead, it was due to what Sen called 'entitlement failure', meaning that people could starve not just because of crop failure, but also because their income was insufficient to command food on the market, or because they could not claim food directly from the state or their family. Thus, it was not just the general availability of food that was important, but individual access to it (Sen 1982). This perspective was put forward in the 1994 *Human Development Report* – in which Sen acted as consultant – and stated definitively that 'the overall availability of food in the world is not a problem'. Instead, it was argued that assets, employment and income security were vital, with the conclusion drawn that unless these were effectively provided at the individual level, then 'State interventions can do little for food insecurity' (UNDP 1994, p. 27). But

while the *Human Development Report* broke new ground with its prescription, it remained wedded to older habits of indication. That is to say, while the precise quantification of human security was considered impossible, it was still levels of daily calorie supply, food production per capita and food import dependency that would best reveal which people were most in need of food security (ibid., p. 38).

The second criticism made of the food security definition coming out of the 1974 World Food Conference was that nutrition had to be taken more seriously. In short, individuals could be fed but not necessarily be healthy. This argument was often made with reference to high levels of child mortality, since children are particularly susceptible to micro-nutrient deficiency and unclean water. The criticism helped to raise the profile of the provision of childcare and diversity of food, casting women (or more precisely mothers) as agents of security and focusing on the dynamics of intra-household distribution. Third, and finally, subjective interpretations of security were brought to the fore. In part this was a reaction to the difficulties of measuring nutritional sufficiency given differences in individual appetites caused by age, sex, size, workload, and so on. It also signalled the recognition of the cultural importance of food and of feelings of insecurity caused by having to eat the 'unacceptable' (Maxwell 1996).

By the time the FAO-convened World Food Summit came around in 1996, each of these intellectual cases had gained enough credibility to be reflected in a new codification. References were made to 'access', 'nutritious food' and 'preferences', and food security now defined as that condition when:

All people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (FAO 1996).

Yet this was not the last word on the subject. The most recent elaboration of the food security concept was marked by the food crisis of 2007-2008, when world prices for key commodities once again moved rapidly upward. Tim Lang and David Barling (2012) referred to it as 'a point of departure' when 'the old discourse on food security and insecurity came under threat' from one that positioned food as a question of sustainability. This departure emerged out of the assessment of the different causes cited for the 'second food crisis' – including population and dietary change in Asia, as well as tightening global supplies of fossil fuels – and issues such as obesity, supply-chain inequality and climate change that had become accepted as legitimate food concerns. Yet despite the calls for a shift towards sustainability, the rhetorical demand for security was resurgent. Tom MacMillan and Elizabeth Dowler show how before the crisis the UK government derided an approach centred on the idea of national food security as 'fundamentally misplaced'. Two years on, the Prime Minister himself was endorsing a report which did just this, and, in his words, set 'a benchmark for that action we must take – both in the UK and globally – to ensure our long-term food security' (MacMillan and Dowler 2012). To some extent, this conceptual circle was squared in the same way as on previous occasions: new agendas were simply annexed to the meaning of food security. For example, at a G8 summit in 2009 the international community pledged to act 'with the scale and urgency needed to achieve *sustainable* global food security' (L'Aquila Food Security Initiative, 2009, no page numbers, emphasis added). Likewise, Lang and Barling (2012, p. 321) demurred on an entirely new approach and instead concluded that 'the only food system to be secure is that which is sustainable, and the route to food security is by addressing sustainability'.

### **Food security: concept and modality**

The conventional genealogy sketched in the previous section offers a cumulative narrative of the development of food security. In this narrative, food security is treated as a conceptual lodestar, towards which it is hoped that policy will be oriented. The overwhelming assumption seems to be that by providing ever-more sophisticated accounts of food security, it will be possible to better identify those in need and devise more effective policies to assist them. However, this view of food security as the object of linear progression leaves out important questions about the meaning of food security as a modality; an omission which simultaneously forecloses deeper analytical engagement with the problem of food and unnecessarily restricts the normative potentialities of security.

To begin with, such a narrative reveals a narrow obsession with the definition itself. This is reflected in the dozens of alternative definitions of food security that have been advanced, each suggesting a different way of encapsulating the food problem (Sage 2002). The proliferation of alternatives raises two main issues. The first pertains to operationalization. For instance, in its flagship

report *The State of Food Insecurity*, and based on its 1996 definition, the FAO identify four food security dimensions – availability, access, utilization and stability – which are measured by eighteen indicators. These include average protein supply from animals (availability), domestic food price index (access), access to improved sanitation facilities (utilization) and absence of violence/terrorism (stability). Its conclusion, unsurprisingly, is that ‘food security is a complex condition...Improvements require a range of food security and nutrition-enhancing interventions in agriculture, health, hygiene, water supply and education, particularly targeting women’ (FAO 2013, p. 28). Yet from such expansive analyses priorities must be drawn, and, inevitably, this reintroduces institutional and/or ideological bias. For example, despite its fidelity to the official definition of food security, the FAO has been criticised for: (a) prioritising food availability over utilisation and thereby supporting agricultural production over health programmes; and (b) for prioritising chronic hunger over transitory hunger and thereby weakening the case for action against temporary food price spikes caused by financial speculation (see MacAuslan 2009, Moore-Lappé et al. 2013). The second problem relates to the implicit assumption that definitions and their associated discourses emerge in a power vacuum. As noted by C. Clare Hinrichs (2013), the ‘discursive fungibility’ of food security not only reflects changing intellectual agendas but also changing power relations between governments, international institutions, social movements and economic interests. Consequently, as Patrick H. Mooney and Scott A. Hunt (2009) have argued, we must acknowledge that the definition of food security is not a technical exercise but a site of political contestation where actors with different agendas, resources and abilities struggle to shape outcomes. There is no ‘correct’ meaning of food security waiting to be uncovered.

The definitional quest, then, has its limits. But more than this, security is not just a label that we can use to describe a particular reality; it is also a political modality for framing and dealing with that reality. This is because security brings forth a political problematic that goes beyond attempts to fix its meaning into a definition, regardless of how comprehensive the concept may be. The security modality privileges a certain way of seeing the world, one in which an issue is posited in terms of a fundamental relationship to life and death, thereby being inscribed with existential importance (Wæver 1995, Huysmans 1998). Exploring this power of ‘food security’ requires one to go beyond the FAO definition made in 1974 and adopt a broader perspective into the meanings historically attached to food.

Very briefly, the idea of food as a site of political concern invoking fears and anxieties of a public nature can be traced back to Antiquity, namely to Socrates’ assertion that ‘No man qualifies as a statesman who is entirely ignorant of the problems of wheat’ (cited in Nally 2010). The perception that food might shift from a question of day-to-day administration to become an existential problem was popularized in the modern era with Thomas Malthus. He asserted that ‘the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man’, and that these two unequal powers ‘must be kept equal’ (Malthus 1998 [1798], pp. 4-5). In other words, the inability to produce sufficient agricultural surplus would always act as a brake on population growth, and if for some reason existing supply should be reduced, it was only ‘natural’ that some of those it supported be left to die too. Paradoxically, the eighteenth century was also the era when customary practices to mitigate natural scarcity were replaced by principles of free trade and market scarcity, so that another kind of food-related security issue emerged: the food riot, cast by the ruling classes as a revolutionary hazard despite its often orderly nature (Thompson 1964). In expressions like ‘society is only nine meals from anarchy’, the fear that a sudden disruption in food supply will lead to breakouts of public discontent and civilizational crisis remains with us today, usually in the wake of bouts of hyperinflation or breakdowns in critical infrastructure such as supermarket logistics (Platt 2011).

The association of food with national security concerns, meanwhile, is especially visible during periods of international warfare. Here we can see food cast as a means for military success, both directly as a weapon of war – in the form of sieges, embargoes and scorched earth policies – and indirectly as in the *Dig for Victory* campaign in Great Britain during World War II, which called for citizens to grow their own food in order to help free up naval capacity. Food has also been presented as the reason why people should sacrifice themselves for war efforts, as in President Roosevelt’s rallying call for ‘freedom from want’, which was popularly portrayed as a family feasting on a Thanksgiving turkey (Shaw 2007). Finally, there is the persistent argument that relying on other countries for food constitutes an unacceptable kind of trade dependence. As George W. Bush once warned:

Can you imagine a country that was unable to grow enough food to feed the people? It would be a nation that would be subject to international pressure. It would be a nation at risk. And so

when we're talking about American agriculture, we're really talking about a national security issue (Bush 2001).

In all of these examples, although the term 'food security' may be absent, the tropes of statism, scarcity, sufficiency and survival are all clearly evident. The purpose of highlighting these key security tropes related to fear and to an anxiety regarding the integrity of the political body is to suggest that long-standing associations reveal the presence of security as a broad rationality for dealing with food problems, and not simply as a label that has more recently been attached to them. If we are to make sense of the ways in which the problem of food is conceived in contemporary politics, we need to go beyond the 'surface-level' of official texts and speeches. By proposing that food security be approached as a political modality – one deriving from context-specific ideas and struggles, whilst calling for particular political responses – we wish to shift the focus from a description of what food security is or should be, towards a deeper analysis of how it has emerged and what it does. With such an approach, it becomes possible to assess in a more detailed way the explanatory benefits of adopting a security lens for seeing food problems, and to make a judgment on the political value of this lens.

### **The dangers of food security**

So what has security done for food? Among scholars that have considered the loaded nature of the term, three accusations can be discerned: first, that speaking of food as a matter of security increases tension and encourages conflict; second, that it enables social control; and third, that the security framework plays into the interests of transnational capitalists. These three criticisms show the extent to which food security can be considered a modality with dangerous political implications.

Since security evokes a political modality that can be readily derived from the realms of defence, it is not surprising that it is commonly connected with nationalistic and militaristic measures. Of particular relevance here is the theme of 'resource maintenance', that is, of the seeming need for states to ensure continued access to raw materials perceived as strategically important and increasingly scarce (Lee 2013). This theme fuses the Malthusian concern regarding population with geo-political anxieties about 'rising powers', and has been conjured up in books like *Resource Wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict* and *Earth Wars: The Battle for Global Resources* (Klare 2001, Hiscock 2012). Some critics thus see food security as having an intrinsic logic that exacerbates and naturalises international conflict, 'pitch[ing] us into a way of thinking which sees national security in old-fashioned, destructive, and competitive ways' (Tansey 2013, p. 4).

In this vein, others have pointed out how food has often been subordinated to foreign policy goals rather than developmental ends, particularly by the US government. For starters, the country had long used food aid as a means of pursuing diplomatic and strategic interests, including Nixon's 'Food for War' programme that covertly allowed South Vietnam to buy arms by selling-on 'charitable' food donations, and the use of food embargoes against the Soviet Union during the Cold War (Tarrant 1981). In the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the construction of a new global enemy, US food policy changed as well. Jamie Essex (2012, p. 200) notes how world hunger is increasingly seen by US State officials as providing leverage for 'warlords, terrorists and dictators to manipulate or control' the vulnerable – with the result that the US now supports international Food for Work programmes primarily as a deterrent for terrorist recruitment strategies. The 'securitization' of food, that is, its framing as an existential question demanding exceptional measures that go beyond or around the normal processes of political deliberation, can also be seen in domestic US food policy (Buzan et al. 1998). C. Clare Hinrichs (2013) has drawn attention to the 2002 Public Health Security and Bioterrorism Preparedness Response Act, which required the newly created Department of Homeland Security to establish risk management for food infrastructure – protection of critical infrastructure being a particular post-9/11 concern (Dunn et al. 2007). Through this, priority was given to defending US food and agriculture from attacks, disasters and other emergencies, but to the detriment of hunger-related food concerns, which pose their own risks to human life (Hinrichs 2013).

The second charge levied at security is that it functions as a tool or technique of government. This is evident in works inspired by Michel Foucault's writings on governmentality and biopolitics, which focus on the way life is managed in liberal societies to maximise the natural capacities of 'the population' (Foucault 1990 [1976]). David Nally (2010) has used this approach to explore the political modality underpinning historical responses to food, showing how in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe a distinction emerged between 'the population' and 'the people'. The population was not simply the aggregate of individuals needing to be fed but a distinct category comprising the willing subjects of a series of administrative techniques aimed at fostering particular forms of living whilst disallowing others. In the

case of food, this entailed organising food provision around free trade, with recalcitrant elements being cast as 'people' that rejected the market system of planned scarcity and sought to subvert or disrupt it in some way. Deemed undesirable and undeserving, the 'people' were thus identified as threats that could be allowed to die from hunger, with this process rationalised as an improvement for the political body as a whole (Nally 2010).

Techniques for the categorisation, prioritisation and surveillance of threats to populations have since become pervasive. This has been hastened by the growing reach of political power into the minutiae of life, by the development of technology and statistical instruments and – importantly in the context of our paper – by the advent of the human security discourse, which helped to legitimise a whole range of areas as targets of political scrutiny (De Larrinaga and Doucet 2008). In the case of food for example, various mapping systems and surveying techniques have been created to identify and target the food insecure (see Shaw 2007, Barrett 2010). For Jenny Edkins, the treatment of food as an arena of biopolitical intervention suffers from the same delusions as Victorian-era attempts to make sense of hunger and eradicate it through science, technology and bureaucratic management. By directing resources to ever-more extensive monitoring systems such as early warning alerts for famine or foodborne diseases, technical experts and other modern day 'improvers' blind us to the fact that hunger and ill-health are produced by processes that are inherently political that cannot be easily managed away (Edkins 2000).

The third charge made against the food security modality is that, in the words of Geoffrey Lawrence and Philip McMichael (2012, p. 135), it has been 'appropriated by neo-liberalism... [and] equated to the supply of food from world granaries via transnational corporations'. In this Marxian reading, food security is shorthand for a trade-based policy agenda, used instrumentally by global capitalists to advance the industrialisation of agriculture and the marketization of food provisioning. These critics aptly point out that there are already enough crops being produced in the world to provide everyone with their daily calorie requirements; the problem is that these calories are maldistributed, lost along the supply-chain as they are transformed into meat or biofuel and/or consumed to excess by more affluent and increasingly obese global consumers. Put simply, hunger is a relational problem and not an absolute one that can be solved by growing more food. A quote from the Chief Technology Officer of Monsanto shows how security has been appropriated to create a societal justification for what might otherwise be seen as a self-serving commercial agenda to sell more seeds and agro-chemicals:

Food security is among the greatest challenges facing our planet today... If we don't work cooperatively and quickly to provide farmers with new tools to feed a growing planet, we will be facing a crisis... We [Monsanto] will continue to be relentless in searching for new tools to feed the world and forging public-private partnerships to address food security challenges (Fraleigh 2013, no page numbers).

A distinctive feature of this criticism is that it steers away from the suggestion that security has any intrinsic meaning, arguing instead that food security has been purposefully manipulated and instrumentalized. For instance, Lucy Jarosz (2011, p. 118) writes that changes in the definition and scale of food security 'serve to further entrench neoliberal ideology as defining the problem of world hunger and shaping responses to it'. Rather than its use by corporations, however, she focuses on the way food security subjects individuals and households to mechanisms of global governance that advance market inclusion as the means to provide security for the rural poor, either by boosting their purchasing power as wage earners or their productivity as food producers.

It is from this perspective that food security is most commonly set in opposition to the concept of food sovereignty. According to its detractors, food security serves an ideological function to pave the way for genetically-modified seeds, factory-farmed animals and supermarket retail outlets. In this context, food sovereignty naturally emerges as a political alternative that aims to democratise and decentralise control of the food system – everything that a security-centred paradigm is deemed not to be. For example, Peter Rosset (2005, p. 462), a prominent academic campaigner for peasant farming, has argued that food security means people 'must have the certainty of having enough to eat each day... but says nothing about where that food comes from or how it is produced'. Similarly, Raj Patel (2009, p. 665) has noted that 'as far as the terms of food security go, it is entirely possible for people to be food secure in prison or under a dictatorship'. In other words, not only does security mask the underlying interests of transnational capitalists, it also denies that which makes food so much more than just a collection of calories. For these critics, when placed under the sign of security, food's contribution to the physical landscape, its cultural qualities, and its association with choice and creativity are all too readily sacrificed.

## The potential of food security: insights from Brazil

The previous section showed how conceiving of food security as a modality allows us to identify and scrutinize some of its dangerous political implications. Even when the language of 'security' or 'threat' is not explicitly used, framing food problems as security issues triggers a transformation in the political process. This transformation may entail questionable measures, pave the way for more intensive and fine-grained interventions in the management of life, and legitimize the reproduction of dominant interests. The case against food security is therefore a strong one. However, this is only one side of the story. Once we fully accept security as a political modality for dealing with issues, we are also assuming that security is the result of context-specific assumptions and interactions. In other words, security as a register of meaning may have strong and deeply-ingrained connotations, but it does not follow an intrinsic logic and is not fixed once and for all. Further, it is possible to conceive of security in a different way, by anchoring ideas and practices of security in other referents ('who is to be made secure'), normative assumptions ('what security should entail') and modes of operationalization ('how security should be pursued').

Whilst remaining cognizant of the limitations of security – limitations that often derive from the misplaced belief that dangerous connotations exhaust the 'true' meaning of security – we propose to approach food security from the standpoint of its emancipatory possibilities for individuals and groups. In the wake of the definition of human security advanced in the 1994 *Human Development Report*, we follow emancipation-centred approaches that conceive of security as a democratic, participated and accountable process of alleviating vulnerability and harm, in order to open up space in people's lives so that they can make decisions and act in a decisive way in matters pertaining to their own lives (Booth 2007, Basu 2011, McDonald 2012). Our argument is that in some circumstances security can be seen an emancipatory means for dealing with food problems – in other words, food-as-security may enable a transformation in political procedure that broadens the capacity of those involved to influence the course of their lives.

In order to illustrate this we draw on examples from Brazil. This is a country that has made great strides in reducing hunger, meeting the Millennium Development Goal target to halve its proportion of hungry people well ahead of the 2015 deadline, and becoming as a result an international 'poster child' for progressive development policy (see Oxfam 2012). It is also a country where discourses of security, rights, social justice and sovereignty are all evident in debates around food. We are not claiming that the Brazilian experience can be reduced to the use of a security vocabulary alone, but rather that the presence of security can have emancipatory effects in specific circumstances. These effects should not be disregarded just because security also has its dangers. In the following sub-sections we identify three effects of food security that can and should be salvaged.

### *Security expedites action to address existing vulnerability and harm*

We are going to create appropriate conditions for all people in our country to have three decent meals a day, every day, without having to depend on donations from anybody... We need to eradicate hunger, extreme poverty, and social exclusion. Our war is not meant to kill anyone – it is meant to save lives (Lula cited in da Silva et al. 2010 p.9).

With this declaration in his inaugural speech as Brazilian President, Luiz Inácio 'Lula' da Silva invoked a security discourse for food, using the simile of war to help mobilise state and civil society actors toward the defeat of hunger. This was a theme he would return to again and again, later describing hunger as 'the best weapon of mass destruction which exists today' and a threat which had to be assailed (*Al Jazeera* 2005, Lula da Silva 2011). This rhetoric clearly articulated with his government's major social policy initiative – the Zero Hunger (*Fome Zero*) programme – and the institutional apparatus created to house it, the Special Ministry of Food Security, and, later, the Ministry of Social Development and Fight Against Hunger. We noted earlier that security is associated with emergency politics and exceptional measures, and how this is typically cast in a pejorative light within the academic literature. However, a corollary of this is that as an exigent condition, meaning one that must be fulfilled immediately, food security also allows for an awareness to be raised and action to be expedited in cases of systematic harm like widespread hunger.

Going against the grain of much security studies literature – which overwhelmingly assumes that security removes an issue from democratic political deliberation – the Brazilian case also shows how security has functioned as a potent form of politicisation, allowing for new arenas of political intervention to be identified and food politics to be stretched beyond the incidence of hunger. This can



be illustrated with the example of access to seeds and land. It was noted earlier how the language of food security has been used by agribusiness to facilitate their market expansion. However, security is a sword that cuts both ways. Facing market takeover by foreign companies, a major Brazilian seed association argued that this amounted to a complete 'loss of control over our own seed breeding and germplasm' and that this 'affects the sovereignty of a country, because it is a matter of food security and food security is national security' (Patriat 2011, no page numbers). Likewise, increased levels of foreign investment in land have also made agricultural producers nervous about their future, and they have registered this concern in the language of security. For instance, the President of the Association of Soybean Producers said that 'the foreign thrust is worrisome, as it pushes the Brazilian competitor away from the business and allows the territorial occupation of Brazil' (Sauer and Pereira Leite 2012, p. 892). This sentiment has been heightened where the investor in question is China; it has been argued by Brazilian politicians and commentators that state-backed Chinese investment cannot be separated from its foreign policy interests, and, as such, must be treated as a security issue. In fact, such pressure even led to extant interpretations of Brazilian land legislation being revisited at the behest of the government, with a decision being taken to rehabilitate the state's ability to regulate land acquisition (ibid.).

Of course, the treatment of seeds and land as issues of security should not blind us to the self-interest that lies behind such claims. Brazilian companies are expanding into new territories with problematic implications – see for example the attempt to transform huge tracts of land in Mozambique into plantation farms under the ProSavana project – and of course rarely consider the risks posed to their host's national security. Nevertheless, for those who wish to oppose neo-imperial forms of capitalist development, the call for security and the subsequent appeal to the defence of the realm would appear to be a pragmatic means to forge alliances with domestic groups with whom they might otherwise lack a common political language. In this sense, the security modality can be mobilized to tackle forms of harm and vulnerability reproduced by the expansion of global capitalism.

#### *Security allows for the public sphere to be reinforced*

A common reading of the political effects of security is that it helps to justify decisions taken 'behind closed doors', away from the normal procedures of democratic deliberation, thus avoiding public participation and impoverishing the public sphere. Ian Loader and Neil Walker have argued against this view, advancing the claim that security is a 'thick' public good, that is, not only a necessary platform *for* political society but also an education *in* society. In other words, security concerns teach people how to be with each other. This is because these concerns stem from a problem whose provenance is inescapably to do with inter-personal relations – it is people who plunge one another into a state of insecurity – and which can only be alleviated when individuals gain confidence in their ability to manage collective dangers. Moreover, Loader and Walker (2007, pp. 163-164) argue, security has an intrinsic role in the very production of 'the public':

the celebration or yearning for common security against internal and external threats... looms large in the materials – the mentalities, metaphors and iconography – through which stable communities register and articulate their identities as stable communities, as indeed does the sense of common language and common territory... [The] actualisation or aspiration [of security] is so pivotal to the very purpose of community that at the level of self-identification it helps to construct and sustain our 'we' feeling – our very felt sense of 'common publicness'.

There is certainly something of this 'thickness' to the way food politics has been articulated in Brazil. The Zero Hunger programme has become widely celebrated for its innovative policies, which include conditional cash transfers targeted at mothers, an ambitious school meal programme, and financial subsidies and public procurement schemes targeted at family farmers. However, the progress Brazil has made cannot be reduced simply to the adoption of 'smart' social policies. Rather, it has been predicated on the history of Brazil's re-democratisation process and the participation of civil society in national politics. In the case of food, this participation has been guaranteed by the Council on Food and Nutritional Security (CONSEA). Born in the 1990s and rehabilitated under Lula, the national CONSEA has become a mobilising force and an influential advisory body on food and nutrition security policy. Composed of fifty-four representatives, two-thirds from civil society and one-third from federal government, it has driven a number of policy changes, including increased funding for school meals and incentives to local food production. It has also elaborated the National Law on Food and Nutrition Security, which, after approval by Congress, made the right to food an obligation of the federal state and institutionalised the existence of Councils on Food and Nutrition Security not

just at the federal level but at state and municipal levels as well (Rocha 2009). Thus, Cecilia Rocha (2009) concludes that food policy in Brazil has graduated from temporary government agenda to permanent state function, and although effective participation at lower levels of governance remains patchy, an active 'food citizenship' has been advanced among diverse groups – from teachers and parents to farmers and clergy.

Again, a note of caution must be sounded about the utility of security in this context. The call for collective food security in Brazil has not been matched by the lived experience of its population. Notably in the North-East and rural areas of the country, and amongst black and indigenous groups, rates of malnutrition remain stubbornly high. Thus sectoral policies in deprived regions have been consolidated through the Territories of Citizenship programme, and the government has launched an extension of welfare payments through the Brazil without Extreme Poverty programme. However, in language redolent of Loader and Walker's account of security, Maria Emília Lisboa Pacheco, a former President of CONSEA, suggested to us that compensatory policies alone degrade the 'connective tissue of society'. Her preference was to tackle the causes of insecurity, which in this case involves tackling inequality (Interview with Lisboa Pacheco, Rio de Janeiro, March 2013).

This speaks to a tension in the Zero Hunger programme itself, related to the need to achieve an 'appropriate combination between so-called structural policies...and interventions of an emergency nature' (da Silva et al. 2010, p.14). It also speaks to the dual dimension of our understanding of food security: it might equally spur, on the one hand, immediate action to ameliorate a particular problem and, on the other, the building or reform of institutions in order to address the structural conditions giving rise to problems. Either way, and although the temporal resolution of a security issue is ultimately to be decided in particular cases, what we can say is that contrary to the fears of security critics, the use of food security in the Brazilian context has not made politics managerial or authoritarian, but rather assisted in its democratisation. Put differently, the security modality has contributed to emancipatory politics.

#### *Security widens the scope of social concern*

If we understand security, in the emancipatory sense, as the avoidance and alleviation of forms of vulnerability and/or harm that prevent people from thinking and acting in matters pertaining to their own lives, then food security is clearly about more than just the eradication of hunger. This is a theme picked out by scholars working in the human security tradition, such as Bryan L. McDonald, who presents food security as part of a larger ensemble that includes other aspects of human health and well-being. On this basis, he identifies three major security challenges: malnutrition; the impact of global environmental change upon food systems; and the question of food safety, that is, the threats to food deriving from disease, contamination and biological weapons (McDonald 2010). Unpacking the threat of malnutrition, McDonald goes on to make the case for a focus on the 'triple burden of malnutrition', which includes energy deficiencies, nutrient deficiencies and excessive net energy intake. He is surely right to do so. Although hundreds of millions are classified as undernourished, more than two billion people worldwide are affected by 'hidden hunger' in the form of vitamin and mineral deficiency, while over one billion are classified as overweight or obese and deemed at increased risk of premature death from diabetes, heart disease and cancer among other diseases (Shaw 2007).

When food is seen as a security issue in the emancipatory sense – that is, as pertaining to different and often interlocking forms of harm and vulnerability – it becomes easier to encompass such concerns, thus going beyond an exclusive (and constraining) focus on hunger. A more complete picture of the different facets of the food landscape is revealed. In this context, security demonstrates its strengths in relation to other terms. Certainly within the food sovereignty literature, while the production of diverse and healthy food has been promoted, little has been said about the health of the eater *per se*. Meanwhile, even staunch proponents of rights-based approaches have acknowledged that within the treaties and literature on the right to food the question of nutrition has been reduced to the receipt of 'adequate food', and as a human right has not been sufficiently articulated with the needs and disadvantages of specific groups like women and girls, for example (Valente 2014).

In the Brazilian case, nutritional concerns began to be grafted onto the conventional notion of food security from the 1980s. According to Marília Mendonça Leão and Renato Maluf (2012) the rationale behind this was to link food provision to the country's popular movement for better healthcare, and to cement an inter-sectoral approach to tackling hunger. This linkage also avoided demarcating the availability of food from the quality and safety of that food, and thus lessened the possibility of discursive capture by those who would simply advocate the increased consumption of calories as the solution to food problems. However, just because security makes possible the

recognition of such interlinked vulnerabilities and forms of harm, it does not necessarily follow that the political resolve will be found to avoid or alleviate them. Data for Brazil suggest that 13% of men and 17% of women are obese, with rates even higher amongst adolescents (Mendonça Leão and Maluf 2012).

Paradoxically, one explanation for this increase is that the family grants awarded under the auspices of the Zero Hunger programme have resulted in a 'nutrition transition', as poor people with rising incomes shift from traditional diets based on rice and beans toward diets based on processed food dense in sugar, salt and fat – encouraged of course by the interests of the food industry. That said, it would be wrong to conclude that obesity is associated with affluence. During the 1990s and 2000s in Brazil, weight gain patterns in women of different income classes began to even out, such that obesity now affects the poor as much as the rich (Santos 2013). Indeed, one study concluded that female adolescents living in poverty are both prone to hunger and more likely to be overweight – showing how seemingly very different insecurities can be interlocked even at the level of the individual (Kac et al. 2012). Nonetheless, as Brazilian food politics begins to turn its attention to this threat to people's health, we note that the language of security is once again playing an important role. Reflecting our first point about expediting action, the country's Health Minister José Gomes Temporão has already warned in respect of obesity that 'We are in a situation of red alert' and 'sitting on top of a time bomb' – an attempt, perhaps, to use anxiety over the body politic to advance protective measures for the body literal (Viga Gaier and Grudings 2010, no page numbers; Yapp 2010, no page numbers).

## Conclusion

Security has become crucial to understanding the problematisation of food. The conventional way of studying this phenomenon has been to interrogate the *concept* of food security in policy documents and government declarations. We argued that greater attention needs to be paid to the modality of food security, the way it advances assumptions about the nature of the problem and legitimizes transformations in the political *operandus*. This is because the vocabulary of security and threat does not simply describe a problem; it has a constitutive role in shaping what the problem is deemed to be, and what the most adequate solutions are. As a constitutive force, security is inherently social: it emerges out of political interactions and struggles, whilst deriving from ideas about how political communities should be organized. In this sense, security is certainly not without its dangers. However, as a contested terrain that is also open to the spread of emancipatory ideas and practices, it holds great potential for grasping the complexity of food problems and for conceiving alternative policies to tackle them. Examples from contemporary Brazil were provided in order to illustrate the potential benefits of food security for expediting action to address harm and vulnerability, reinforcing the public sphere and widening the scope of social and political concern.

With this reflection about the meaning of food security, our objective is not to strive for a more fine-tuned definition or a measurement that can be used to pinpoint precisely who is or is not insecure. Rather, we wish to explore what security can do to an understanding of food and malnutrition that is consonant with an emancipation-inspired agenda for world politics. In this context, we argued that food security can enable swifter political action by creating discursive conditions that allow people to claim that harm is being done against them, or that they are in a situation of acute vulnerability. By allowing for the intensification of public participation in food-related problems, food security also has the potential of countering the encroachment of technical and managerial solutions, which normally avoid ethical reflections about assumptions and effects. Because it enables us to identify the enabling or constraining conditions that allow forms of food-related harm and vulnerability to emerge, food security might also challenge the tendency within current debates to seek to 'improve' those who are already suffering – making farmers change their traditions, for example, or making mothers attend nutrition classes. Finally, by expanding the scope of concern across issue-areas and across time (i.e. from historical vulnerabilities to potential harm), the security vocabulary makes it easier to meaningfully politicise different aspects of the food provisioning system. We highlighted obesity in the case of Brazil, but this might equally apply to eating foods sprayed with agro-chemicals, or to relying on ever-fewer countries and/or companies to supply food – both of which also pose long-term threats.

In what ways is this reflection useful for the quandaries currently faced by the human security agenda? In this article, we addressed the criticism that security brings little added-value for explaining issues normally embedded in narratives of development or rights. We also tackled the suspicion that security brings with it an inherently problematic logic, which necessarily results in heavy-handed policies. Our defence of food security as a modality that can be harnessed in emancipatory politics

can be applied to other issues in the human security agenda. We conclude that the vocabulary of security/threat is best conceived, not as a description of a given reality but as a particular framing of issues – one with underlying assumptions and with implications that must be taken on board and scrutinized. Security is inherently political and as such derives from particular ideas and struggles, thus being susceptible to change. Despite the danger of being co-opted and instrumentalized, security has great potential for advancing a political agenda of emancipation and human well-being. The case of food tells us that the spirit of human security is as important and timely as ever.

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